

## Book Review

### ***Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition***

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James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. 301 + xviii pp. ISBN 978-0-691-14746-8. \$12.21 (pbk.)

James Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama* is a high-speed and breathless journey through over 200 years of American political history and theory which gives the work of John Dewey a place of central importance. According to its narrative, these two centuries of American thought find their natural fruition in the political career of Barack Obama. The book, through an introduction to some of the most prevalent intellectual currents in American politics (both past and present), philosophical pragmatism as embodied in the work of John Dewey and his expositors (most specifically the work of Richard J. Bernstein) and various conceptions of constitutional democracy, is intended to construct an understanding of Obama as an intellectual president best understood through his theoretical influences. Kloppenberg's ultimate claim is that when viewed through this framework, it becomes clear that Barack Obama offers a new type of civic republican founded upon a backdrop of philosophical pragmatism. Most concretely, it is argued that Obama shows a strong awareness of conditions of uncertainty and provisionality as well as the necessity for an experimental stance in the realm of politics. Out of this complex "matrix," Kloppenberg ultimately portrays Obama as extraordinarily sophisticated and deep in his understanding of the American tradition, ultimately realizing that "democracy in a pluralistic culture means coaxing a common good to emerge from the clash of competing individual interests" (xiv).

In chapter 1, “The Education of Obama,” the above themes are all in evidence. First, Obama is described as “a man of ideas”—so much so that it seems that Obama has exhaustively absorbed and synthesized the whole set of political ideas offered an American in the twenty-first century. One might find this portrait of Obama a little too rose colored. Indeed, one might conclude (as I am tempted) after reading *Reading Obama* that Obama himself has not actually embodied or digested all these ideas, but rather that it is almost too easy to project upon Obama the ideas one wants to see. So, for example, an academic might see in Obama the real-world fruition of the academic study of politics—or even see Barack Obama as the academic president. This, of course, is a trait quite useful if it is desired to offer hope and a sense of broad possibility to a voting public. Hopefully, this tempting interpretation will prove wrong.

In any case, Kloppenberg claims that Obama actually embodies and acts on a quite extended and sophisticated set of ideas. Obama’s education is, indeed, actually reflective of a certain type of American experience. From Occidental, to Columbia, Harvard, and finally the University of Chicago (where he apparently continued his education by teaching law and acting as community organizer), Obama’s education was, simply put, conducted among the American academic superstars of his time. The names dropped in *Reading Obama* make up a substantial list, but among the few listed at the beginning are John Dewey, Gordon Wood, Cass Sunstein, Michelman, Tribe, Alain Locke, Unger, Kagan, Mikva, Nussbaum, Stone, and Posner. A layman could get a somewhat accurate sense of the intellectual elites of our time (and earlier) by just listing the names dropped by Kloppenberg in relation to Obama’s education. (As an intriguing aside, one might also create an interesting and informative counter-narrative by noting the significant names at each of these institutions that are left off Kloppenberg’s lists. And, of course, the California elites at Stanford and Berkeley are not really present.) Along with the names given significant emphasis, there are also the various concepts deemed central. As with the names of individuals, ideas such as civic republicanism, philosophical pragmatism, historicism, and communitarian discourse are all introduced in an equally breathless fashion. According to Kloppenberg, Obama ends up upon completion of his education with a heartfelt conception of democracy as based upon dynamic deliberation wherein communication builds consensus and a type of communal democratic virtue. Dewey returns to be the guiding light of our first African American president.

This narrative is reinforced in chapter 2. “From Universalism to Particularism” starts with an overview of the theory of John Rawls and the practices of Saul Alinsky, but it also adds the theories of Taylor, Sandel, Habermas, Nozick, Hayek, Geertz, Kuhn, Fanon, Derrida, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Rorty (whom Kloppenberg calls the “Trojan horse of American philosophy” [128]), among many others, into the mix. Here, while all the above-listed claims (those from chapter 1) are repeated, a new one, also central to the book, is foregrounded. This claim is that

Obama, because of his sophisticated understanding of the American tradition, and the corresponding development of a political stance strongly situated in civic republican thought, adopts political positions that cut across the traditional American liberal and conservative descriptions, therefore frustrating dogmatists holding to the current simplistic political narratives. This is because his version of revised Dewey-based and Rawls-influenced civic republicanism embraces particularism and historicism and emphasizes constructive and forward-looking democratic virtues rather than institutional constraints. Ultimately, as to views offered within the academy, Kloppenberg finds Bernstein's conception of democracy most similar to Obama's. This conception entails: 1) fallibilism; 2) the "inescapably sociocultural character of individual experience" (133); 3) the community-based nature of inquiry; 4) sensitivity to contingency; and 5) pluralism (here the names referenced are Wittgenstein, Habermas, Dewey, Putnam, Sen, Kuhn, and Geertz). The final outcome? Dewey is processed through Rawls so that Obama inhabits "a pragmatist version of Rawls's case" (145).

This story continues with further development in chapter 3, "Obama's American History." Here, Obama is once again situated in academic culture, particularly a legal academic culture that sees the Constitution not as a fixed set of rules, but rather as "a long-running conversation" (153). The voices emphasized at this point are John Adams, Jane Addams, Louis Brandeis, Woodrow Wilson, John Dewey, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and more recent constitutional scholars such as Laurence Tribe, Michael Dorf, and (Obama's current "regulatory czar") Cass Sunstein, the latter all proponents of the idea of a partial and evolving Constitution. Once again, these commitments are thought to follow from a commitment to civic republicanism, philosophical pragmatism, and deliberative democracy. This, in turn, leads to a reading of the U.S. Constitution as a forward-looking aspirational challenge, not an anchor. Indeed, Kloppenberg sees Obama's continuing flexibility, willingness to compromise, appeals to negotiation, hope for bipartisan solutions and "creative compromise" as all following from his sophisticated pragmatic republicanism (165). Further, if Kloppenberg is correct, accepting this description shows that what often appears as waffling, weakness, or the unwillingness to take a strong stand is actually a firm and principled commitment combined with a patience that shows "an iron fortitude" (165). Finally, from the above theorists, combined with the work of Danielle Allen and Eddie Glaude (and the earlier work of Ralph Ellison), Obama learned that developing a sophisticated narrative imagination and the ability to sympathize across difference creates an awareness "that willingness to compromise, that commitment to fallibilism and experimentation, does not reveal a lack of conviction. Instead it evinces a particular kind of conviction, the conviction of a democrat committed to forging agreement rather than deepening disagreements" (222).

Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama* has some signal virtues. First, it offers a nice overview of American political theory from the founding fathers to the present.

Second, it serves as an introduction to the influential intellectual currents in Washington at this moment. Further, in situating Obama within the traditions of civic republicanism and philosophical pragmatism, Kloppenberg resurrects theories that have (wrongly) been marginalized in contemporary politics. This is all to the good. In some sense Kloppenberg's narrative is in many ways very hopeful. Indeed, harkening back to the last election, it is possible to claim that *Reading Obama* offers content with which to fill in the otherwise largely content-neutral placeholders "hope" and "change."

That being said, there are also some worries that such a book invites. First, given its breathless and survey-level quality, it becomes an open question as to the audience the book is aimed at informing. Scholars of political theory will not find much new to the story other than the claim that Obama offers a new synthesis of the various strains of American political traditions. Nonscholars, on the other hand, will more than likely be overwhelmed by the lists of names and concepts and need more guidance than the book offers for a satisfactory understanding of either the tradition or Obama's intellectual heritage. Finally, while Kloppenberg's picture of Obama as a civic republican philosophical pragmatist, and his political stance as not waffling but rather a type of political courage, is attractive, this conclusion is one to be supported by results, and these appear decidedly ambiguous or questionable so far. Indeed, it will be interesting to see how Obama campaigns in his second run for office after the more optimistic hopes and changes desired by left-leaning citizens have been continually sacrificed to what could at this moment be variously described as (happily) a well-founded civic republican democratic and pragmatic philosophy or, rather (unhappily), as a vulgar political pragmatism based upon opportunism and horse trading. I do hope that Kloppenberg and the picture of Obama offered in *Reading Obama* is correct, though I am not so optimistic given what has been brought to the table so far.

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